

# Colleen Dulle - Who is Pope Leo? 5 surprising things I learned while reporting on Robert Prevost

When Cardinal Dominique Mamberti announced “Robertum Franciscum Prevost” would be our next pope, taking the name Leo XIV, I was not sure what to think. My first reaction was shock that an American had been elected to lead the Catholic Church, but I knew little of the man beyond the basics of his résumé.

Over the last two months, the “Inside the Vatican” podcast team has been putting together a three-part deep dive series aimed at answering the question “Who is Leo XIV?” We’ve approached the question from a number of angles, talking with the genealogist who first tracked down Pope Leo’s Creole family roots, a childhood friend and fellow Augustinian friars who have known him for decades, his parishioners from Peru and his colleagues at the Vatican.

Of course, no number of interviews can reveal the full mystery of a person, and with the entire world looking for answers about one man at the same time, many of the descriptions we heard of the new pope had already been shared many times before: that he is a good listener, soft-spoken and a bridge-builder. Still, several insights surprised me that I hadn’t seen in much of the coverage of Leo XIV. Here are my top five.

## 1. He’s a good friend.

John Merkelis, O.S.A., who goes by “Merk,” has been friends with Pope Leo, whom he calls Bob, since the two were in their early teens. They attended the Augustinian high school seminary in Holland, Mich., and continued their studies—Merk a year behind Bob—at Villanova University and then the Catholic Theological Union.

One Labour Day weekend, when the two were students at C.T.U., most of the Augustinians living in Chicago roadtripped down to St. Louis. Merk stayed behind, feeling sick—a fortuitous sickness, in a way, because it meant he was near his family in Chicago when he got the news that his father had died. He left a note at the Augustinian residence, as this was pre-cell phones, and went to stay with his family for several days.

When he returned to the house, around 1:30 in the morning, a sole figure was sitting on the front steps: Bob Prevost. He had seen Merk’s note and waited up for him to come home. “It was really dear,” Merk told me on the podcast, as we both got a bit misty-eyed. “That captures him. That absolutely captures him.”

## 2. His ministry in Peru was risky.

Father Bob Prevost worked in Peru for a year beginning in 1985, then returned from 1987 to 1999, starting parishes and forming young priests for the Augustinians and the Diocese of Trujillo. The ’80s and ’90s in Peru were dangerous times. Beginning in the 1980s, in the country’s rural south, two terrorist groups had begun ravaging the country, destroying infrastructure and assassinating foreigners and political leaders.

John Lydon, O.S.A., one of Father Prevost’s two housemates in Trujillo, recalled how the Augustinian leadership had asked its members in Peru to draft a plan to withdraw from the country, but they refused. Throughout the time of Father Prevost’s ministry as a priest, the wave of terror spread north, and the state responded forcefully, killing some 70,000 Peruvians. Meanwhile, the economy and democracy itself were on the brink of collapse. In the mid-1990s, a new president took power: Alberto Fujimori. Although democratically elected, President Fujimori would overstay his five-year term, dissolving the congress and becoming a de facto dictator. Under his rule, Father Lydon said, Peruvians were subject to repression and human rights abuses.

In response, student and civil society groups marched against the regime’s abuses, and Father Prevost—now better known as Padre Roberto—organized the two Augustinian parishes, painting banners and marching alongside them in the streets.

“Because Bob, myself, the other priests were foreigners, because of the colour of the skin and all that, it’s clear to police and everyone that you are a foreigner and you’re a priest. So those two things served as...a shield of protection, so that there wouldn’t be any overt repression of the march,” Father Lydon said.

### **3. As a pastor, he empowered lay people.**

In the late 1960s, the Augustinians in Peru launched a pastoral experiment inspired by the Latin American bishops' initiatives at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. The experiment, which they called the "New Image of the Parish," was aimed at giving lay people the ability to lead evangelization and mission work in their communities. Such lay empowerment was a necessity, particularly in rural areas where priests were few and far between.

Under the "New Image" plan, each parish was divided into smaller geographic zones, and a team of lay people led the church's activities in that zone. Father Lydon explained that those activities varied widely, from delivering parish bulletins to people's homes to teaching catechesis and organizing donations to meet community members' material needs. The Augustinians, including Father Prevost and Father Lydon, trained lay people and supported them, but the leadership came from the lay teams.

Socorro Cassaro Novoa, a lay leader from the parish of Santa Rita de Cascia, explained: *Padre Roberto was someone who connected with everyone, adults, youth, even little kids. He reached everyone. That style of his really encouraged more people to get involved in pastoral work. It wasn't just about the parish building; it was about going out beyond, doing mission, helping others and proclaiming what we could do to our brothers and sisters. It was really beautiful work, and I think we all got involved, especially with Padre Roberto, who got everything started.*

### **4. He's firm but can change his mind.**

In the days following the conclave, as I asked around about Cardinal Prevost, I heard one thing repeatedly: that he is a good listener, will hear all sides of an argument, but when he makes a decision, he is firm in it. Arthur Purcaro, O.S.A., who worked closely with then-Father Prevost during his time at the helm of the Augustinian order (2001- 13), said the same in a pre-interview conversation for this podcast, and I asked him just how firm Prevost was in his decisions. Was there ever a time, I asked, when he had made a decision and then changed his mind?

In our interview, Father Purcaro surprised me by letting me know that he had checked with Pope Leo himself to confirm the details of one memory he had of the now-pope changing his mind—and that Leo had given him permission to share the story. When Father Prevost was prior general of the Augustinians, Father Purcaro explained, many other men's religious orders had begun adding "care for creation" to their peace and social justice initiatives. Father Purcaro asked Father Prevost if the Augustinians could do the same.

"He thought about it very reasonably and listened and said no," Father Purcaro recalled. But after Father Prevost attended a meeting of the Union of Superiors General, an organization of the superiors of men's religious orders, he changed his mind. "He came back to me and said, you know, I think we should really do this," Father Purcaro said. "This says something to me about who he is. [This] and the fact that he's the one telling the story."

### **5. Pope Leo is not Robert Prevost.**

Emilce Cuda, the secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, worked closely with then-Cardinal Prevost when he headed that commission during the two years before his election as pope. She told me about her impressions of him but issued a word of caution that changed my entire perspective on this deep dive project: "Now we are speaking about Prevost, but Leo will not be Prevost. He will be Leo, the pope."

She makes a good point. Being elected pope is a life-altering event most of us will never understand. Cardinal Prevost went from being a high-ranking cleric who kept a low profile to being one of the most famous people in the world. His predecessors' elections transformed them: For example, Pope Francis described how, as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, he had been ready to retire, but after his election, he experienced a new energy that carried him through the next jam-packed dozen years.

Dr. Cuda's comment made me realize that although I had set out to answer the question, "Who is Pope Leo XIV?" the question I had succeeded in answering was "Who is Robert Prevost?" It is an answer that can point toward who Pope Leo will be, but it cannot tell us entirely. The answer to that question is currently unfolding before our eyes with each day of this nascent papacy.